

CITY OF EAST LANSING

The Home of Michigan State University
May 17, 2005

Representative John Stakoe, Chair
Members of the Local Government & Urban Policy Committee
House Office Building
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI

Regarding House Bill 4473

Dear Committee Members:

I represent the City of East Lansing as the Operations Administrator for the Code Enforcement and Neighborhood Conservation Department and as Secretary to the Michigan Association of Housing Officials.

The City of East Lansing is proud to be home to one of our largest and finest universities, with one of the largest undergraduate populations in the country. However, this does present us with unique challenges in trying to assure that a large number of young adults, living on their own for the first time, are residing in safe and blight free residences. Approximately 66% of the residential units in East Lansing are rental, with the majority of those being rented by young adults.

The majority of rental units in the City of East Lansing change tenants every 9 to 12 months. Due to the nature of the rental cycle in East Lansing, large populations of tenants move at approximately the same time posing a challenge for property owners to be able to adequately prepare units for the incoming tenants. Most of the rental houses are some of the oldest housing stock in the City, ranging anywhere from 40 to 90 years old. These houses typically are licensed to have 4 or more unrelated people living in them. For many of these reasons East Lansing inspects and renews most rental licenses annually.

Mandating that inspections be limited to no more than every three years and up to every 5 years would dramatically increase the risk of unsafe situations in many of our rental units, leaving many young people vulnerable to danger. You may wonder, what could be so dangerous? As an example, during a 12 month period our inspectors cited 366 incidences of non functioning smoke alarms, 25 exit sign violations, 166 incidences of hazardous material, 5 non-functioning fire alarm systems and 240 violations of improper means of egress. Keep in mind these violations are found at inspections where the tenants and property managers both have had adequate notice that an inspector is coming to make an inspection and we had just been there a year ago! Even in the cases of highly responsible property managers, tenants can quickly change the environment in which they reside. In addition to these numbers hundreds of violations are cited for

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numerous other code violations ranging from electrical and plumbing issues to windows that do not open, doors not working, holes in walls, broken handrails on stairways, broken guards on balconies. One can only imagine what these numbers would be if we only inspected every 3 – 5 years.

If we inspected every three years, how often would items that needed prompt repair be left undone? Recently I noticed a broken window at a rental property near my daughter's school. I assumed the property owner would get it repaired in a timely manner. A week later I ran into the property manager and mentioned the window and that I assumed it was repaired. He admitted it was not, he was waiting for the tenant to repair it. I asked that he please get it repaired, the weather was getting cold and rainy. Nearly a week later, instead of a broken window, the window has been removed and plastic put up inside. A picture is attached of this window with a date of when the photo was taken. Today, almost another week later this window is still broken. We now have no other choice than to send a violation notice with a reinspection date.

In regards to reinspection times, this bill proposes that reinspections be no sooner than 30 days from the inspection. In my example this would allow the window to be out for 2 months from the time it was first broken. What if this was a furnace problem in the winter, or a problem with water leaking?

Two photos are attached of an obviously messy house. The inspector had gone out for a reinspection of violations found at an annual inspection. The owner, property manger and tenants knew the day and time the inspector was coming. However, as you can see by the photos they did not feel the need to clean up for his reinspection. One of the complaints of more than one tenant was that they had mice. You can imagine that they probably did.

The last two photos are of a bathroom and bedroom in an apartment where the property manager requested that the inspector specifically inspect the apartment unit in an effort to assist the property manager in documenting the condition of the apartment. Of course people can live in a messy environment; however, notice the candle on the bathroom counter. In an apartment with this much debris the fire danger is increased also endangering other occupants of the apartment building.

Our inspectors take pride in the fact that they want to be a service to the property owners and a resource when needed. Many of our inspectors routinely receive calls from maintenance personnel and property owners asking about different ways something can be repaired, what the pros and cons may be of a particular type of repair, etc. Our housing inspectors will go to our trades inspectors and fire inspector to collaborate on research to help with problems in the field in order to help a property owner. If you pass HB 4473 housing departments can only charge for the time an inspector is actually at the inspection and that the hourly rate be determined by the inspector's salary. This will have a crippling

effect on the ability of a department to be able to adequately serve its customers. Departments simply will not have the resources to support the personnel needed to adequately assist customers.

A recent article in the Argus Press quotes Representative Ward as saying, "There's quite a bit of evidence, especially in college towns, that local governments are making a great deal of money on apartment inspections, and that's passed on to college students." So does this mean if landlords did not have to pay for an inspection, the rental rates will all be significantly reduced even if the market will bear a higher rent? Secondly, the law currently provides protection from excessive cost by requiring that fees must be related to what it costs to administer the housing program. Cities across the state are currently going through the budget process in a very public forum. One would think that this so called "quite a bit of evidence" would have become an issue during the public budget processes. If the attempt of this bill is to shift the cost of rental inspections from the rental property owners to the general taxpayer most communities will no longer be able to afford regulation of rental property allowing substandard housing to increase. A bill with this intent is damaging and will not protect the general population of our communities.

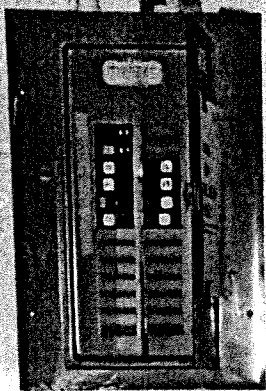
Every community has its own unique challenges that they face in these tough economic times. This bill will only increase these challenges and lead to a higher risk of fires, substandard living conditions and blighted neighborhoods. Please vote to remove this bill from further consideration.



Annette M. Irwin
Operations Administrator
Code Enforcement and Neighborhood Conservation
City of East Lansing

Michigan Association of Housing Officials, Secretary

Attachments



05/12/2009

Must
Be
21
To
Drink

In Case
Of
Emergency
Call
911

05/12/2005

